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# Ahab's Book Shop

By Joseph Zornado  
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Late one afternoon  
as the sun died in the west  
a bookshop proprietor  
heard the books on his shelves  
die. His yellowed  
fingertips stopped moving from one  
worn spine to the next;  
he had been feeling for  
a story that might explain  
his suffering.  
Instead, he was struck still  
by the whispering spines—  
a thousand threads  
loosening in their bindings—  
decomposing, decomposing.  
"Damn," he mutters,  
"I think it's closing."

I said "shelves" a moment ago,  
but "shelves" is not exactly right.  
He hears the rotting like cockroaches  
trotting, even when he lays in bed.  
He knows a doctor's findings will  
explain it all and attribute it to some  
post-modern, gerontological blight.

Still, the quiet sound of death  
provides an inkling  
of just how fast his shop is sinking  
(as a *memento mori* should).  
I think you ought to know  
that aside from selling used books,  
drinking bourbon, and killing rats,  
this book shop proprietor maintains  
four or five bowls of candy that stud his aisles  
in sweet defiance of the rotting.  
Tootsie rolls and butterscotch  
lifesavers spill over every  
brim of every bowl—  
he thinks sweets might help  
a child hunt his shop—



He has only seen one there, though,  
 this past month, and watched him  
 greedily as the brown-eyed boy  
 munched handfuls of tootsie rolls  
 and dropped a trail of waxy leafs  
 of wrapping paper.  
 Like a squirrel doubting a too-straight  
 trail of nuts, the boy moved slowly  
 from bowl to bowl  
 stepping further into the book shop  
 where the ceiling, pregnant  
 with the outside world, hangs—  
 warped with age really—ready to  
 burst in from above.

"Come 'ere," the proprietor croaked,  
 reaching a withered hand—covered with  
 age spots, like knots in oak—towards the child.  
 His face—uninviting leather,  
 bent to the floor from nigh a century  
 under a sagging roof—reads "death,"  
 but the child, who does not yet read,  
 grabs another handful, looks at the hand,  
 and scampers to the  
 front door in search of a father.

The proprietor mutters "bourbon" and  
 slumps over like a rain-soaked pile of  
 second-hand romances.  
 Over his desk a small tattered card still glows  
 from the yellow lamp that stays on day and night,  
 its Pilot's wheel barely phosphorescent:  
 "Jesus, Savior, Pilot me."

Only the books themselves  
 hold his shop up. Though they stand, piled high,  
 their arthritic, dessicated spines continue  
 to stiffen and fray from the use of a hundred  
 rude hands. Loose pages slip unseen  
 to the floor like late November's leaves,  
 falling, mixing with the waxy remnants of the  
 tootsie rolls and lifesavers and patches of carpet.  
 What's the use trying to save them?  
 the bourbon bottle mutters from a corner  
 of his desk. What's the use?  
 What is the use?

"Stay together!"  
 the proprietor barks  
 and shoots a blood-shot stare at a  
 listing stack of coverless paperbacks.  
 He rises and slowly shakes his bottle  
 half-filled with liquid butter-scotch.  
 The splayed and fragmented books on his desk  
 whisper again. The proprietor—  
 in a fit now stands up  
 and thrusts his shirt tails in  
 and draws his hand across his hair  
 and draws in a huge chest of air  
 as if suddenly risen from the depths,  
 but then just as quickly slumps  
 down again at his desk.  
 He drinks, picks up a leather-bound  
 Melville and leans into  
 the yellow light to  
 read again of Ahab's  
 death as if it were his own.